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draft/what I think

On Iraq: I expect that a consensus will soon emerge among Democrats and Republican leaders that U.S. troops in Iraq will be reduced by roughly one-half—down to a level between 60,000 and 120,000—by the end of 2008, starting perhaps as soon as September or October. Except for the White House, the goal would be to remove “most combat troops” by April 2008; for the White House, this would be achieved by the end of the year, or early in 2009. The remaining forces—perhaps as many as 120,000 but more likely 60-100,000—would be “withdrawn” to the base camps within Iraq, with their remaining missions being “only” to execute “specialized counterinsurgency missions” (ostensibly against Al Qaeda in Iraq, in provinces like Anbar or Diyala): to provide a stabilizing presence in the Kurdish areas in the North (i.e. to prevent the Kurds from declaring independence, which would draw in the Turks; and to discourage Turkish intervention); to train “Iraqi national forces” (though these, as of now, represent a collection of sectarian units); and to protect remaining U.S. forces (i.e. the Green Zone including the Embassy, and the camps). These reduced forces would remain in Iraq indefinitely.

What would no longer be performed, supposedly, would be “participating in or trying to prevent sectarian violence,” “kicking in doors and arresting people” or pacifying Baghdad, or the rest of the country, as a whole. This “reduced mission and presence” corresponds closely to what Hillary Clinton told the New York Times on March 13, 2007, that she would enact as president. (Also what Morton Halperin proposed to me, independently, he says, of Clinton, in late February). It has now been endorsed as a goal by Secretary of Defense Gates. It amounts to what the Baker Commission—of which Gates had been a member—recommended (although the Baker Report did not make clear whether this was a temporary, transitional presence, or whether—as the emerging consensus indicates—it would be continued indefinitely). It will be described, even by President Bush (who wants to postpone it until, perhaps, early next year) as corresponding to accepting the Baker Commission recommendations, and have bipartisan support.

Actually, the missions specified could justify a much larger force, even larger than at present, although the figures above correspond to various published estimates. (Neither Clinton nor Gates have stated estimated figures). Moreover, nothing is said, by any participants in the discussion, of the continued role of American airpower, or its impact on the civilian population. (Tom Engelhardt and contributors to his newsletter are almost alone in raising this issue). Almost surely it would continue, indefinitely, from the American bases maintained; and probably with continued destructive impact, or even greater than at present, on Iraqi civilians. (The policy might amount to substituting American airpower for ground troops—as under Nixon in Vietnam—though in support of whom, against what purported targets?)

This, I believe, is what is being described by all advocates, and also by the media, as “withdrawing from Iraq.” It is no such thing. Even to say that it “withdraws ‘almost’ all combat troops” is misleading. First, the definition of combat troops is elastic. Moreover, the remaining missions most definitely include combat: killing and dying. Above all, while the audience is meant to focus on the words “almost all” and to hear “US forces” as the subject, most accounts do not mention the level of remaining US forces at all, and if they do, to specify amounts that remain very sizeable (some ranging as high as 100,000 or 120,000: which can be seen as a significant reduction only compared to the present, “surge” levels; in other words, they amount to reversing the surge, returning to pre-surge levels, which, at the time of the November election, were precisely the target of public frustration and opposition).

With the new missions, and general redeployment away from Iraqi neighborhoods back to the base camps, American casualties would probably go down significantly, and with them, American news coverage and public attention. These would be among the effects specifically sought, along with some reduction in budgetary costs, and considerably less strain on Army and Reserve tours of duty, rotation, and morale. Iraqi casualties, already almost invisible to the American media and public, would probably continue much as before, if not greater, as American airpower operated in support of various Iraqi units.

In short, American occupation of Iraq would continue, indefinitely, with bipartisan support. Almost surely, Iraqi opposition to it would continue, along with the recruiting incentive for Muslim extremists worldwide. (Notably, there is news today—July 11, 2007—of a successful mortar and rocket attack on the Green Zone, killing two American servicemen and wounding 18 people).

What is being described as a program for “getting out of Iraq” is in fact a program for staying in, “forever.” Almost surely, this reflects a preoccupation not only in the Administration but in high policy circles among the Democrats, *not* on “how do we extricate the U.S. from our armed presence and involvement in Iraq?” but on “how do we *maintain* our armed presence and control of a nominal Iraqi government in Baghdad (one that will ask us to stay), indefinitely, in the face of current public impatience?” The consensual program I describe might actually succeed in doing that, for a prolonged period. Even though we would still be occupying Iraq, contrary to the current wishes of many in the public, there would appear to be encouraging “progress” toward eventual extrication, along with reduced U.S. casualties and costs, which could well buy the Administration a good deal of time free from powerful protest in Congress or the public. That would reproduce what Nixon achieved in 1969-72 with his steady force reductions (though punctuated by protests at his misguided escalations in Cambodia and Laos). At any rate, I believe, it is what leaders in both parties propose to try: behind a deceptive cover of advocating “withdrawal.” (Nixon, too, exploited the ambiguity of the word “withdrawal,” describing his reductions—which he intended, as of 1969, to end at a floor well above zero—as “withdrawals.”)

There are other parallels with the situation in 1969, in particular, the issue of whether Congress, or the Administration, should set a definite time-table for withdrawal (or even,

reductions). The pros and cons being expressed now, and for the last year, are almost identical to those in the debate from 1969-72. (As before, the advocates of a time-table allege, on the basis of substantial evidence from opinion polls in Iraq and demands of parliamentarians, sectional leaders, and various of our adversaries, that to announce a definite schedule of total withdrawal (not merely, reduction) might *immediately* lower attacks on U.S. forces, U.S. casualties, and the recruiting appeal of anti-occupation forces and Al Qaeda worldwide. Opponents, of course, counter with arguments as to how this would immediately be trumpeted worldwide as success for insurgency, and would fit into a strategy of the insurgents of “simply waiting for us to leave, and then...” The appeal of the latter argument was spurious then, and seems still more so now. [This requires analysis.]

I suspected that this policy lay behind the proposals for the Democratic bills a few months ago, which called only for reductions but not for total withdrawal, much less a time-table for or commitment to total withdrawal. Thus, I suspected that the gap between those who wanted short-term, total withdrawal—Kucinich, Lee, Waters, the Progressive Caucus—and the leadership close to Pelosi and Reid, was much larger than the latter claimed, and that it reflected a difference in aims much deeper than a matter of timing, on the start or completing of “withdrawal.” The real difference was between real withdrawal, extrication, an end of occupation (whenever completed, within one or two years) and indefinitely continued occupation, intended to be permanent.

That difference, I am saying, is now becoming explicit, and the latter position is becoming a “bipartisan” one, including both Democratic leadership (all the main candidates plus the Congressional leaders) and an increasing number of Republicans, including most Congressional leaders and even some in the administration, such as Gates (with even Bush hinting that he could accept this, *faute de mieux*, next year. The exceptions, still, are Cheney and Elliott Abrams, and, so far, all the main presidential candidates, along with neo-con columnists.

How bad would it be? How much of an improvement over the present situation? Would it, indeed, have benefits, not only for us but for Iraqis? That is not actually easy to say, with any confidence. Whatever those benefits might be, it seems important that they be discussed openly—which is not at all happening now--along with serious public consideration of the continued costs and dangers and possible alternatives: rather than , as now, “debating” either for or (by the White House and neo-cons) against an alleged “withdrawal” proposal that is actually quite different from what it is claimed to be.

The reduced-presence occupation policy *would* mean (as I said to Harry Rowen in 1969, about Nixon’s corresponding covert strategy, with respect to Vietnamese victims) that we would be bombing and shooting Iraqis forever. And in this case, that we would persist in inflaming Muslim hostility towards us daily and yearly as at present, reducing our national security by increasing dangers of terrorist attacks on us at home and our forces worldwide that did not exist during Vietnam.